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JULIAN K. GORSKI

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RIVALRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ANNCR:

THE RECENT SUSPENSION OF SINO-VIETNAMESE TALKS IN HANOI ON ETHNIC CHINESE IN VIETNAM IS BEING WATCHED WITH KEEN INTEREST BY WESTERN OBSERVERS FOR CLUES AS TO THE OVERALL SITUATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA...AS WE HEAR NOW IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM VOA'S JULIAN GORSKI:

VOICE:

ON THE FACE VALUE, SUSPENSION OF TALKS BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES DOES NOT NECESSARILY PORTEND ANY MAJOR SHIFT IN THEIR RELATIONS. THE HEAD OF THE CHINESE DELEGATION, VICE FOREIGN MINISTER, CHUNG HSI-TUNG, SAID HE WAS STILL HOPEFUL FOR AN EVENTUAL SETTLEMENT OF THE CHINESE ETHNIC PROBLEM. BUT, AS POLITICAL OBSERVERS NOTE, HE DID ACCUSE VIETNAM OF "CLOSING THE DOOR TO THE NEGOTIATIONS." AND VIETNAMESE VICE-FOREIGN MINISTER HOANG BICH SON -- WHO ESCORTED MR. HOANG TO THE HANOI RAILROAD STATION -- CHARGED THE CHINESE WITH DISPLAYING LACK OF SINCERITY.

EVEN SO, IT IS BEING NOTED, SUCH AN EXCHANGE OF VERBAL REPRIMANDS WOULD PROBABLY HAVE RELATIVELY LITTLE SIGNIFICANCE HAD IT NOT OCCURRED AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF INCREASING TENSIONS IN THE AREA. VIETNAM HAS ACCUSED THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA OF MASSING TROOPS ALONG THEIR COMMON BORDER.

AND THE CHINESE, FOR THEIR PART, CHARGED THAT IT IS VIETNAM THAT IS "BEEFING UP ITS MILITARY STRENGTH" WITH THE INTENTION OF BROADENING ITS ZONE OF OCCUPATION IN CAMBODIA. THE CHARGE WAS MADE IN A COMMENTARY PUBLISHED BY THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY NEWSPAPER, THE PEOPLE'S DAILY, AND DISTRIBUTED BY THE NEW CHINA NEWS AGENCY.

"PREDICTIONS FROM VARIOUS QUARTERS INDICATE," SAYS THE PEOPLE'S DAILY "THAT THE VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES MAY LAUNCH A NEW OFFENSIVE AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE RAINY SEASON WHEN THEY CAN USE THEIR ARMORED TROOPS AND AIR FORCE."

THE PEKING PUBLICATION CONTINUES WITH THIS OBSERVATION: "IT IS PRECISELY AT THIS JUNCTURE THAT THE SOVIET UNION HAS STEPPED UP MASSIVE AIRLIFTS OF MUNITIONS AND TECHNICAL PERSONNEL TO VIETNAM. SUCH ACTIONS," THE PEOPLES DAILY SAYS, "CAN HARDLY BE ACCIDENTAL."

WESTERN OBSERVERS HAVE BEEN WATCHING THE SOVIET SUPPLY OF MILITARY AID TO VIETNAM. WASHINGTON POST NEWSMAN DON OBERSDORFER REPORTS THAT THE AIRLIFT INVOLVED MORE THAN TWO DOZEN SOVIET FLIGHTS TO HANOI'S NOBAI AIRPORT WITH STOPS IN PAKISTAN AND INDIA. AS A RESULT OF THESE AIRLIFTS, MR. OBERSDORFER GOES ON TO SAY, U.S. ESTIMATES OF SOVIET MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONNEL IN VIETNAM HAVE BEEN ROUGHLY DOUBLED THOUGH -- AS HE NOTES -- "FIGURES ARE CONSIDERED IMPRECISE."

ALTHOUGH THE AIRLIFTING OF SOVIET TECHNICIANS IS BEING REGARDED BY SOME WESTERN OBSERVERS AS A MOVE TO REPLACE CHINESE TECHNICIANS WHO PULLED OUT LAST SUMMER, THERE IS SPECULATION, THAT THE SOVIETS ARE SUPPLYING ARMS AND AMMUNITION TO HELP IN THE VIETNAMESE OFFENSIVE AGAINST CAMBODIA.

IN ITS COMMENTARY ON THE SITUATION, THE PEOPLE'S DAILY CAUTIONS THAT VIETNAM'S MILITARY ACTION AGAINST CAMBODIA WILL HAVE "AN IMPORTANT BEARING ON PEACE IN ASIA AND SECURITY IN ALL SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS." AND THE CHINESE NEWSPAPER ADDS: "ALL THE ACTS OF THE VIETNAMESE AUTHORITIES ARE CLOSELY RELATED TO THE SOVIET MANEUVERS OF EXPANSION IN ASIA."

BUT THE CHINESE ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION APPFARS TO DIFFER FROM HANOI'S. AMERICAN CORRESPONDENT MICHAEL PARKS OF THE BALTIMORE SUN REPORTS THAT VIETNAMESE OFFICIALS VEHMENTLY DENY ACTING AS A SOVIET SURROGATE. DURING HIS RECENT VISIT TO JAKARTA, VIETNAM'S PRIME MINISTER PHAM VAN DONG WAS QUOTED BY AN INDONESIAN OFFICIAL AS SAYING:

"WHY, AFTER DRIVING OUT THE FRENCH, DRIVING OUT THE AMERICANS, WOULD THE VIETNAMESE INVITE THE RUSSIANS IN? THE RUSSIANS' -- ACCORDING TO THE QUOTATION PUBLISHED BY THE BALTIMORE SUN -- "ARE ONLY BEING USED TO KEEP THE CHINESE OUT, AND IN A WHILE THEY, TOO, WILL BE GONE."

WJL/RCS